

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 12, 2010

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Nigeria's Acting President Johnathan Goodluck said today in World Magazine that the violence in Nigeria was “purely ethnic,” and that outsiders had misperceptions about the violence. World Magazine also noted that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) designated Nigeria as a “country of particular concern” in 2009. The following op-ed by Leonard A. Leo, USCIRF chair, and commissioner Don Argue appears Tuesday, April 13 in the European edition of The Wall Street Journal.

Nigeria's Descent Into Religious Strife

The failure to prosecute the perpetrators of Muslim-Christian violence has created a climate of impunity.

Anticipating this week's U.S. visit by Nigeria's Interim President Goodluck Jonathan, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a U.S.-Nigeria bi-national commission to address a number of topics, including corruption, security and economic issues. But what seems missing is any discussion of Nigeria's long-standing failure to prosecute and convict the perpetrators of Muslim-Christian violence. This failure has created a climate of impunity that further fuels religious extremism.

A wave of sectarian violence over the past few weeks has made an already tense presidential succession even more precarious. In and around the northern community of Jos, the death toll from Muslim-Christian clashes has topped 500. The scene is grim, with stories of women and children being hacked down with machetes. The crisis is a real test of Mr. Jonathan's leadership.

How many people have been brought to justice for this recent massacre or for any of the other sectarian clashes going back to 1999 with over 13,000 dead? The sad answer is none. Sometimes offenders are arrested, but only to be released a few hours later. Sketchy lines of authority between federal police and state and local governments have only contributed to this breakdown of law enforcement.

It is no accident that this sectarian violence in Nigeria has largely occurred in the predominantly Muslim part of northern Nigeria. Though Nigeria's constitution declares that there is no state religion, twelve state governments have instituted Islamic Sharia law. Christians in the north regularly told us during our visits that they feel like second-class citizens and face discrimination. In July 2009, for example, the radical Islamist movement Boko Haram instigated widespread rioting in northern Nigeria's Bauchi state, leaving as many as 900 dead and many more displaced—Christians and Muslims alike. All this violence was perpetrated under the banner of repelling “Western education.”

Just two months before the Boko Haram bloodshed, our commission recommended that Nigeria be designated a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which was passed to promote religious freedom as a U.S. foreign policy. In our view, the Nigerian government has the capacity but not the will to protect its citizens. This state of affairs could be a catalyst for further violent religious extremism, and, in turn, international terrorism.

The most recent sign of Nigeria's descent into religious violence came several months after our report, with the attempt to destroy a Detroit-bound flight on Christmas Day. The terrorist, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was a Nigerian, and, no doubt, every facet of his life inside and outside his home country will be pored over in the course of his prosecution. However, the Obama administration must go beyond the specifics of this case and initiate a serious review of the conditions that are leading to the growth of extremism in northern Nigeria, which is where Mr. Abdulmutallab was raised. It is hard to know whether al-Qaeda or affiliated groups are on the ground in Nigeria. The government says they are not, though the fact that Washington added Nigeria to the list of 14 countries whose citizens will have to face intense screening before boarding U.S.-bound planes raises real questions.

Nigerian officials are quick to argue that these clashes are not about religion but instead the by-product of tribal or ethnic tensions as well as economic disparities. This sort of denial is making matters only worse. No doubt, ethnic power struggles and economic disparities fuel hate and resentment. But access to money, land, and power often cut along religious lines.

Religious differences have been leveraged to stoke controversies over broader economic and political issues since the dawn of civilization. This means that Nigerian leaders must think more creatively about how to engage the belief structure supporting religious extremism. Nigeria has a rich cultural tradition of religious toleration and harmony—there are, for example, many families in the southern part of the country that are mixed Christian and Muslim and that enjoy peace and stability. And the father of the Christmas Day bomber approached both Nigerian and American officials to raise alarm about his son's extremist views.

These are the signs of a culture that can preserve a public square marked by religious tolerance and harmony rather than the kind of extremist ideology that foment violence, repression, and discrimination. Abuja must demonstrate that it doesn't tolerate religiously motivated violence, and the United States and other international actors need to assist Nigeria's government. A few individual prosecutions predicated on well-founded evidence would be a good start. Nigerian police need to be trained to identify the early warning signs of violence, to prevent conflicts from boiling over, and, when violence ensues, to address and stop clashes in a manner consistent with human rights. The United States and a number of European nations could provide the necessary technical expertise and training.

Nigeria is among the world's largest oil suppliers. It boasts one of the most vibrant economies in Africa and supplies a significant number of peacekeeping forces for operations in Africa. The United States, not to mention Africa, simply cannot afford to have such a strategically and economically important country be torn apart by religious extremism.

With a new government, now is the time for the United States and the European Union to put these issues front-and-center and demand political will and action.

[Click here to view the article.](#)

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director
tcarter@uscirf.gov, or
(202) 523-3257
begin_of_the_skype_highlighting

(202) 523-3257

end_of_the_skype_highlighting

.